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ABSTRACT

PETCO is a simulated corporation used as a teaching tool in the pre-employment training program at the Galang Refugee Processing Center in Indonesia. The refugees in the program are in low-level classes. The use of the simulation allows the staff to present hands-on, task-based learning techniques to address four major concerns of refugees entering the American work force: workplace rules, time, payroll, and workplace behavior. PETCO has been integrated into the larger pre-employment training program, and has been found to be successful. (MSE)

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PETCO: An American Workplace Simulation

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PETCO is a simulated corporation used as a teaching tool in the Pre-employment Training Program at the Galang Refugee Processing Center in Indonesia. The refugees in this program are all in low-level classes, and at present all are Vietnamese. The use of the PETCO simulation enables staff to present hands-on (task-based) learning techniques in order to address four major concerns: workplace rules, time, payroll, and workplace behavior. This article describes how PETCO has been integrated into the Pre-employment Training Program to address these concerns.

Are low-level English speakers succeeding in the American workplace? Some are, for a variety of reasons: prior work experience, a good stateside support system, or simply through personal determination. However, many others struggle daily to understand the American workplace, to gain the skills, language proficiency, and cultural awareness necessary for success.

It was with these people in mind that the Pre-Employment Training (PET) Program began, based on the premise that there is a common core of skills, language, and cultural knowledge which employers expect of their new employees.

At the Galang Refugee Processing Center in Indonesia, refugees accepted for resettlement to the U.S. are placed in classes according to their English proficiency. All students study intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) and Cultural Orientation (CO) for twelve weeks. Students who enter with little or no English proficiency are required to attend an additional six weeks of pre-employment training.

Some other traits fairly common to low-level students are their less sophisticated backgrounds, little previous formal education, and work experience limited to self-employment. Many of these students are farmers, seamstresses, and fishermen who have had little or no exposure to employers and who have been accountable to no one but themselves in their previous work. Some refugees are from national capitals and have been exposed to city life, but the low-level students are more often from rural, agrarian settings and are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with modern technologies. Our low-level student population is made up of two main groups: the women and older people for whom education was unattainable or considered less essential in their native culture; and the young men whose education was interrupted by the war in Indochina.

The mission of PET is to prepare refugees to enter and succeed in the American workplace. This is carried out through three areas of concentration: English, American cultural orientation, and basic job skills, all specific to the workplace.

English lessons, like those of American cultural orientation and basic job skills, are taught through task-based activities with an emphasis on giving and following directions and seeking clarification. American cultural orientation classes simulate a variety of American job sites. They convey to the students American values, attitudes, and ideas about acceptable behavior. In basic job skills, students

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become familiar with tools, units of measure, and processes of production common in American jobs.

A high degree of integration among these three areas of concentration results in task-based lessons that may include teaching points from all areas. For example, in a restaurant simulation, students use basic job skills when preparing food according to specific directions and when using unfamiliar tools, ingredients, and measurements. Cultural points are also covered: appropriate treatment of a customer by student restaurant staff, accuracy in portion control, and American methods of calculating bills and making change. English skills, ranging from following and giving directions to making appropriate conversation with restaurant patrons, are reinforced throughout this lesson.

This method of teaching reduces the need to explain abstract concepts and keeps learning in as realistic an imitation of an American work setting as we can create. In this way, we create a real need for the students to communicate and demonstrate appropriate behavior and skills.

In March of 1984, marking the first anniversary of PET, staff from Galang joined the PET staff of Phanat Nikhom and Bataan refugee camps. They reflected on PET's evolution to date and discussed plans for the future. As a result of that meeting, we realized that though each separate workplace simulation presented information within a context, the simulations themselves were within no context. They were realistic in their individual form, but were isolated and insufficient for emphasizing basic points about the American workplace such as consistency, accountability to one's superiors, compensation for work done, workplace relations, and the importance of time. These concepts remained abstract. Something more was needed to connect the PET simulations together in order to present a comprehensive picture of the American workplace.

The PET Program in Galang, being small and flexible, was well-suited to make the necessary changes to meet this need. The staff eventually created the Pre-employment Training Corporation, or PETCO. This is a six-week, ongoing simulation that not only encompasses existing curriculum, but enables us to address these other job-related issues as well. PETCO is an umbrella corporation under which all staff and students function as employees.

Under PETCO, the PET staff took on additional roles. Administrative staff now function as PETCO personnel staff, teacher training staff as PETCO management, teachers as PETCO supervisors, and students as PETCO workers. All are considered employees of the corporation. Student/workers are paid for time spent in class the same way that workers are paid on the job, receiving an amount based on U.S. minimum wage. The currency used is PETCO "funny money," similar in appearance to U.S. money and of real value only within the Galang PETCO Program.

In order to incorporate PETCO into the existing program, the staff looked closely at how refugees were being assimilated into the American workplace and identified problems our students encountered in adjusting to the system as a whole and in functioning from day to day within a complicated network of rules, schedules, and expectations. Through the contributions of staff who had stateside refugee work experience and input from United States education and employment organizations, we gathered the information necessary for adapting the program. The development of PETCO grew from four areas of concern: workplace rules, time, payroll, and workplace behavior.

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The following synopses describe problems Indochinese refugees encounter on the job in the United States, the ways in which PETCO addresses these problems, and the outcome for our students. In our descriptions of PETCO, students are referred to as "workers" and teachers as "supervisors".

Workplace rules

In an effort to avoid conflict, maintain harmony, and demonstrate respect for their employers, Indochinese refugees in the United States may inadvertently create situations that produce an outcome opposite to their wishes. For instance, when Indochinese refugees are given directions to carry out a task and asked if they understand, they may respond affirmatively. They assume that to be the right answer – even though they do not understand the directions and will probably carry out procedures incorrectly. The outcome is conflict and discord in the workplace.

The cross-cultural gap is also evident when refugees deal with workplace rules and policies. They may fail to call in sick or ask permission to leave work for a medical appointment. They may not report an injury or broken equipment or observe

safety regulations because they do not understand the rules or the consequences of failing to adhere to them. This cultural gap, this approach to functioning on the job, causes frustration for the employer and is often misinterpreted as an indication of a defiant or indifferent attitude.

In PETCO, we have addressed these problems by setting up PETCO Rules. We enforce them in such a way that it is clear to the workers that conflict can be avoided by dealing with problems as they arise and that an employer is one to turn to with bad news as well as good.

The following PETCO Rules are explained to workers during their first day on the job with PETCO:

1. Sign in and sign out on time.
2. If you are late for work, your pay will be docked.
3. No unexcused absences are allowed.
4. If you must be absent, inform your supervisor before training begins.
5. You will receive extra pay for overtime.
6. Use equipment carefully.
7. Keep the equipment and work area clean.
8. Equipment must be stored in its proper place.
9. Put equipment and supplies away before you go home.
10. Obey safety signs.
11. Wear proper safety clothes.
12. Report an accident or injury immediately to your supervisor.
13. Your clothes and body must be clean.
14. No fighting or drinking alcohol on the job.
15. No stealing supplies from the workplace.
16. If you don't understand, ask. Your mistakes are expensive and cause delays in work.
17. Any violation of these rules will require disciplinary action.

By not observing the rules, workers create problems for themselves and others. For instance, if workers do not call in sick or do not send an absence note with a friend, they are still counted on for work that day and production plans will have to be altered on short notice. It is the supervisor's job to report unexcused absences. When necessary, workers are sent to the personnel office for disciplinary action. If workers do not observe safety rules or if they misuse equipment, they will be fined up to $5.00 PETCO funny money.

By observing the rules, workers receive immediate positive feedback. PETCO staff members respond warmly when someone with limited English proficiency calls in sick and is able to state the supervisor's name, class number, and the reason for being absent. However, it is not the skill with which the workers carry this out, but the fact they see the importance of following this rule that illustrates their success. The same holds true for workers who express lack of understanding, ask for clarification, or report missing or broken equipment. They receive positive feedback, as would workers who obey workplace rules in the United States.

Time

In the United States, "Time's too short," "Time is money," and "Time is of the essence." Americans place a high value on their time and the time of their employees. Historically, Indochinese refugees have had great difficulty adapting to this concept. Inability to adjust to a time-conscious workplace can have serious consequences. An employee who is not punctual or who dedicates time solely to quality with no thought to quantity may develop a bad work record.

As employees of PETCO, workers must complete time cards daily. They must enter their time in and out of work/class, have these cards initialed by their supervisors, and turn them in weekly for computation. On payday they are encouraged to compare their paychecks to their time cards to verify that they have been paid for all time worked.

In the workplace simulations, students are required to produce a product within a given amount of time. In one lesson, they must assemble a chair within ten minutes. Two lesson simulations are designed solely to illustrate the importance of time in production. In a piecework lesson, workers receive their normal hourly wage for making 25 folders in one hour. They receive a bonus for each additional folder made during that time frame.

During the second simulation, a lamp assembly lesson, each worker makes a lamp and then computes the cost of materials, labor, and a percentage for profit to determine the wholesale price of each lamp. They later assemble identical lamps in a large factory lesson in which each student specializes in one part of the process. When they calculate the cost of these lamps, they find the cost of labor per lamp has dropped. They can charge less for these lamps and increase the profit. The workers learn that this was accomplished through more efficient use of their own time and that this is the principle on which factories function.

Through the use of time sheets, workers become accustomed to measuring time. They begin to see that a workday is made up of increments of time. Through simulation lessons, individuals begin to measure their value as workers partly in terms of meeting time and production quotas.

Payroll

Refugees are often baffled by the complicated procedures Americans use for the simple purposes of paying and storing money. On payday in the United States, an employee receives a paycheck with a detailed pay stub which outlines income, tax deductions, and social security deductions. In order to cash a check, the employee must enter the world of banking with its withdrawals, deposits, a variety of accounts, and specific procedures required for each.

In the United States, many refugees avoid the bank as much as possible by getting someone to cash their checks and pay their bills. In essence they relinquish the responsibility and satisfaction of fully understanding what is happening to their hard-earned money. Since many refugees are suspicious of banking systems in general, they may also keep large amounts of cash at home, deying themselves the opportunity to save money safely.

In PETCO, these concerns are addressed over four pay periods. Students turn in their time cards. Their pay is calculated and all common U.S. deductions are made and outlined on an attached pay stub. The workers take their checks to the bank where they must endorse them correctly and request appropriate transactions. They may deposit, withdraw, or simply cash checks by using the correct forms and following the proper procedures.

Living in a refugee camp, the students do not have much. What little they have is given to them. This reinforces misconceptions they have about the United States as the land of plenty. We want to convey to our students that earning money sufficient to pay the rent and monthly bills is a measure of success for anyone. Workers receive bills for rent, electricity and food, all to be paid with PETCO funny money. With the remainder of their income, they may go the the theater, the department store, or the hardware store to spend their money.

Through this practice, students become more budget conscious and better able to distinguish between necessary and luxury items. They understand and feel comfortable using banking systems and gain the language necessary for dealing with them. In the United States, these skills will enable them to be more self-sufficient in handling their own financial affairs.

Workplace Behavior

Behavior may be the biggest single factor in employees' success or failure. Employment surveys reveal that although most people are hired for their skills, they are usually fired not for lack of skills but rather for unacceptable behavior. Employees whose skills are less than adequate, but who exhibit proper behavior, are seldom fired.

Once in the United States, refugees must adjust to American attitudes and behavior. This adjustment usually comes through trial and error during total immersion in a new work culture. It is a struggle for anyone entering a job with many unwritten and even unidentified expectations. For instance, to get a job, a person must go through an interview process. While this process is understood by most Americans, it is a maze of subtle cultural differences for an Indochinese being interviewed by an American employer. Refugees most likely will not make eye contact and will answer questions in the briefest possible manner. In their minds, this shows the proper respect and humility necessary to get the job. However, American employers may expect potential employees to sell themselves by exhibiting enthusiasm and interest in the job. Contrary to Indochinese culture, these employers may interpret a lack of eye contact as a sign of insincerity. Such cultural differences present potential for misunderstandings. Actions perfectly acceptable in one culture may be seen as rude, passive, or inappropriate for a variety of reasons in another culture.

In PETCO, we try to reduce the mystery of American behavior and attitudes by first explaining job-related culture and later requiring workers to function appropriately on the job.

The interview process is of high priority in PETCO, the goals being to develop workers' ability to discuss past work experience, describe their skills, and behave appropriately during an interview. During their first week in PETCO, workers are divided in skills groups according to their previous work experience (i.e., seamstresses in one group, mechanics in another). There they learn the English necessary to describe their skills. During job counselor meetings, they practice their interview skills in a simulated employment office, using proper greetings, eye contact, means of explaining their education and employment backgrounds, and asking questions. Students have the opportunity to hear the counselors discuss their skills over the telephone to a third party, the potential employer, and are given appointment cards for job interviews the following day. They must arrive on time at a specified place, dressed appropriately and ready to present themselves in simulated interviews with employers. The students' response to this simulation is impressive. Aware that mastering these skills could determine their success in getting a job in the United States, they take it very seriously.

The PETCO staff works with each student throughout the six weeks to prepare résumés, outlining educational and employment background. This includes education in Galang and past work experience with an emphasis on those skills which are transferable to jobs in the United States. In later simulation interviews, students become familiar with presenting and discussing their résumés as a final step in the interview process.

Regarding appropriate behavior on the job, the emphasis is on employer/employee and peer relations. Workers must address supervisors and other PETCO staff as American workers would, by their first names rather than by their title as is the common practice for Indochinese. Workers learn that the American workplace hierarchy may be less clearly discernible than that in their native country. Their boss may be their friend as well as their superior, and yet they must act appropriately in both roles.

Supervisors act as American bosses might, speaking directly, offering constructive criticism freely, and making their expectations clear. This approach of direct instruction and feedback is foreign and even offensive to Indochinese at first. But if not addressed, the difference between constructive criticism and disdain may remain unclear and be a cause for cross-cultural misunderstanding on the job in the United States.

Indochinese workers may begin their jobs in the United States with the notion that one should only speak when spoken to. They may work through coffee breaks, assuming that having a job means to work at all times. However, most work settings also have a social atmosphere, and each employee contributes to that atmosphere. In PETCO, we stress the need to mix with peers. Workers take fifteen-minute coffee breaks. They go to a lounge area to purchase refreshments with PETCO funny money and talk with American and Indonesian staff. In this way, we encourage social interaction and draw the distinction between work time and social time on the job. It is perhaps in this area that students gain the greatest feeling of accomplishment and self-confidence. Without such cultural simulation, students would soon find themselves in the United States, immersed in a culture that may not accept their behavior, leaving them less able and possibly less willing to adjust. But by learning about work roles and American perceptions of job culture while in Galang, students begin to see that American job culture is equal to, but different from, that in their native country. They can interpret their experience in Galang as instructive rather than punitive.

Conclusion

The PETCO approach to pre-employment training of Indochinese refugees is unique and successful. By taking education out of the traditional classroom and into the work setting, we have created an environment in which students can act on what they learn. They are not taught through the presentation of abstract information, but through task-based experience.

The PETCO staff has high expectations of low-level English speakers, and those expectations are usually fulfilled. By the end of the six-week PETCO simulation, students have a working knowledge of American job skills and values and have developed high expectations of themselves. When transferred to the United States and put into practice, this knowledge and confidence will enable them to enter and succeed in the American workplace.

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